

Remarx

"Place-Based Globalism": A New Imaginary of Revolution

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Abstract

Over the past several decades a revolutionary “politics of place” has emerged around the world, linked through globally accessible media, loosely coordinated federations, and international gatherings, most notably the World Social Forum. While traditional revolutionary politics confronts a single space of dominion, the politics of place imagines and creates multiple spaces of freedom and self-determination. It is a politics of the here and now, embedded in place yet globally transformative.

Keywords: Political Imaginary; Global Transformation; Feminism; Place



It seems that the making of a new revolutionary imaginary is under way. Coming into being over the past few decades and into visibility and self-awareness through the Internet, independent media, and most recently the World Social Forums, this emergent imaginary confounds the time-worn oppositions between global and local, revolution and reform, opposition and experiment, institutional and individual transformation.¹ It is not that these paired evaluative terms are no longer useful but that they now refer to processes that inevitably overlap and intertwine.

We glimpse the broad outlines of this new imaginary in the performative self-designations of the “movement of movements”—*We Are Everywhere*, *Other Economies are Possible*, *One No, Many Yeses*, *Life After Capitalism*²—and in the statements of movement activists like John Jordan:

Our movements are trying to create a politics that challenges all the certainties of traditional leftist politics, not by replacing them with new ones, but by dissolving any notion that we have answers, plans or strategies that are watertight or universal ... We are trying to build a politics ... that acts in the moment, not to create something in the future but to build in the present, it's the politics of the here and now. (quoted in Solnit 2004, 105)³

Perhaps the most frequently acknowledged wellspring of this revolution-in-process is the Zapatista uprising in Mexico. Rejecting the old revolutionary ordering of means and ends and the “two-step strategy” of seizing state power as a prelude to social transformation (Wallerstein 2002), the Zapatistas have moved directly to institute what has been seen as a “postcapitalist” indigenous communalism (Neill 1997). Like the other movements for whom they have become both ally and avatar of possibility, their goal is not to wrest control but to create autonomous zones of counterpower.⁴ Michal Osterweil tell us that “[b]y asserting and creating multiple other ways of being in the world, these movements rob capital [or the state] of its monopoly and singular definitions of time, space and value, thereby destroying its hegemony, while at the same time furnishing new tools to address the complex set of problematic power relations it confronts us with from particular and embedded locations” (2004, 8; insertion added).

According to Osterweil, participants in the World Social Forum and others of their ilk are charting a globally emergent form of localized politics that she calls “place-based globalism.” This new revolutionary paradigm combines an expansive and proliferative spatiality with a compressed temporality—traversing the distance from “nowhere” to “now here” (Rebello 2006, following Deleuze). Among its elements and groundings we find the

- centrality of subjects and ethical practices of self-cultivation;
- role of place as a site of becoming and as the ground of a global politics of local transformations;
- uneven spatiality and negotiability of power, which is always available to be skirted, marshaled, or redirected through ethical practices of freedom (while at the same time making them necessary);
- everyday temporality of change and the vision of transformation as a continual struggle to change subjects and places and conditions of life under inherited circumstances of difficulty and uncertainty.

What is most distinctive is the vision of a *place-based* yet at the same time *global* movement for economic and social transformation (Osterweil 2004). For us, this vision is compellingly exemplified in the story of second-wave feminism, which has transformed and continues to transform households, lives, and livelihoods around the world to different degrees and in different ways, rendering the life experiences of many women literally unrecognizable in the terms of a generation ago.⁵ The crucial role of alternative discourses of “woman” and gender in this process of transformation cannot be overestimated. But second-wave feminism also offered new practices of the self and of intersubjective relation that enabled these new discourses to be inhabited in everyday life. The slogan “the personal is political” authorized women to speak of their concerns in legitimate tones, enabling them to connect the private and public, the domestic and national, shattering forever the rigid boundaries of established political discourse.

Feminism linked feminists emotionally and semiotically rather than primarily through organizational ties. Without rejecting the familiar politics of organizing and networking within groups and across space, individual women and collectivities pursued local paths and strategies that were based on avowedly feminist visions and values but were not otherwise connected. The “upscaling” or globalization of a feminist politics did not involve formal organization at the global scale to challenge global structures of patriarchal power. It did not rely on (though did not eschew) coordinated actions and alliances. The movement achieved global coverage without having to create global institutions, though some of these did indeed come into being. Ubiquity rather than unity was the ground of its globalization.

We are intrigued at the way the loosely interrelated struggles and happenings of the feminist movement were capable of mobilizing social transformation at such an unprecedented scale, without resort to a vanguard party or any of the other “necessities” we have come to associate with revolutionary organization. The complex intermixing of alternative discourses, shared language, embodied practices, self-cultivation, emplaced actions, and global transformation associated with second-wave feminism has nourished our thinking about a politics of economic possibility—impressing us with the strikingly simple ontological contours of a feminist imaginary: *if women are everywhere, a woman is always somewhere, and those places of women are transformed as women transform themselves.*

The vision of feminist politics as grounded in persons yet (therefore) potentially ubiquitous has been extended in our thinking to include another ontological substrate: a vast set of disarticulated “places”—households, communities, ecosystems, workplaces, civic organizations, enterprises, bodies, public arenas, urban spaces, diasporas, regions, government agencies, occupations—related analogically rather than organizationally and connected through webs of signification. A feminist spatiality embraces not only a politics of ubiquity (its global manifestation) but a politics of place (its localization in places created, strengthened, defended, augmented, transformed by women).

Feminism's remapping of political space and possibility suggests the ever present opportunity for local economic transformation that does not require (though it does not preclude and indeed promotes) transformation at larger scales. Its focus on the subject prompts us to think about ways of cultivating economic subjects with different desires and capacities and greater openness to change and uncertainty. Its practice of seeing and speaking differently encourages us to make visible the hidden and alternative economic activities that *everywhere* abound, and to connect them through a language of economic difference. If we can begin to see noncapitalist activities as prevalent and viable, we may be encouraged here and now to actively build upon them to transform our local economies. Rather than “waiting for the revolution” to re-create a global economy and governance system at the world scale, we can engage with others to transform local economies *here* and

now in an everyday ethical and political practice of constructing “community economies” in the face of globalization.

For us, the language of place signifies the possibility of understanding local economies as *places* with highly specific economic identities and capacities rather than simply as *nodes* in a global capitalist system. In more broadly philosophical terms, place is that which is not fully yoked into a system of meaning, not entirely subsumed to a (global) order; it is that aspect of every site that exists as potentiality. Place is the “event in space,” operating as a “dislocation” with respect to familiar structures and narratives. It is the unmapped and unmoored that allows for new moorings and mappings. Place, like the subject, is the site and spur of becoming, the opening for politics.

Social movements and their successes have called into question the distinction between global revolution and local reform, showing that small-scale changes can be transformative and that place-based politics can be a revolutionary force when replicated across a global terrain. “Place-based globalism” thus offers an alternative to the traditional revolutionary imaginary, which involves confronting and replacing a global power structure “at the same level of totality” (Hardt and Negri 2000). The universality to which the traditional revolution aspires is grounded in the embracing spatiality of capitalism (conceived as a worldwide system of economy) and the national or supranational sovereignty that exhaustively partitions the global terrain. From the perspective of this universality, everything else is particular, contained. The spatiality of this sort of revolution is hierarchical, global, massive, organized. Its temporality offers the appropriate moment and the millennium.

In the place-based imaginary, every place is to some extent “outside” the various spaces of control; places change imitatively, partially, multidirectionally, sequentially, and space is transformed via changes in place. There's no millennial organization or subject to call into being, no need to address at the “same level of totality” an ultimate (economic?) instance of power, no system to be overthrown or cast aside before a new world can begin. What there is instead is a continual struggle to transform subjects and places and conditions of life under circumstances of difficulty and uncertainty. The universality to which this vision addresses itself is negatively grounded—in the openness of subjects, their potential to become, their partial freedom from fixity. The spatiality of this sort of politics is ubiquitous, scattered, connected semiotically. Its temporality is of the everyday and the continuum.

Another and perhaps very different way to express this: not as two alternative spatial imaginaries, but as two different orientations to transformative politics. The former (masculine) orientation starts with something embracing like Empire. It starts with a positivity, more or less exhaustively theorized and depicted, which it is the project of politics to dismantle and replace. This gives it a millennial quality. The latter (feminine) orientation starts with a negativity, the Lacanian “real” of disarticulated places and empty subjects, and the practice of politics involves articulation and subjectivation. Politics in this vision is an ethical practice of becoming. Place is not a local specificity (or not that alone) but the aspect of potentiality, and the subject is not an identity but the space of identification. For us, places always fail to be fully capitalist, and herein lies their potential to become something other. Individuals and collectivities always fall short of full capitalist identity, and this lack is their availability to a different economic subjectivity (Gibson-Graham 2006). From this perspective, place-based globalism is not simply a potential or actual movement but an alternative logic of politics, one that invests not in what is to come rather than in what is to be replaced.

Shannon Bell, “Aphrodite of the Marketplace: Fetishism, Value and (Sexual) Pragmatism” (10/4)

“The ice of commodity fetishism, manifest as congealed frozen labor, occludes the fire of personal relations. The prostitute breaks through this occlusion. It is the one form of commodity fetishism that doesn't work.”

*

Slavoj Žižek, “Have Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri Rewritten the Communist Manifesto for the Twenty-First Century?” (13/3-4)

“Lenin is for us not the nostalgic name for old, dogmatic certainty—quite the contrary ... the Lenin we want to retrieve is the Lenin-in-becoming, the Lenin whose fundamental experience was that of being thrown into a catastrophic new constellation in which old coordinates prove useless, and who was compelled to *reinvent* Marxism.”

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Notes

¹The World Social Forum is, according to Wallerstein, the "new claimant for the role of antisystemic movement," one that "seeks to bring together all the previous types—Old Left, new [social] movements, human-rights bodies, and others not easily falling into these categories" (2002, 36-7; insertion added). It is not surprising, therefore, that it incorporates a range of positions on strategies for social change.

²These slogans are taken from Notes from Nowhere (2003); the title of the economic alternatives track at the Boston Social Forum, July 2004; Kingsnorth (2003); and the title of a conference in New York in 2004.

³Solnit notes that Jordan was a founding member of Reclaim the Streets (see <http://rts.gn.apc.org/>) and is now involved in the global justice movement.

⁴Exercising power rather than "taking" it, the Zapatistas are operating in the present and in place to make domination impossible (Osterweil 2004). In the words of Subcomandante Marcos, "It is not necessary to conquer the world. It is sufficient to make it new" (Klein 2002, 220).

⁵This is not to deny that these achievements are partial and embattled, but rather to affirm that they are recognizable and widespread.